

Notable & Quotable: ‘National Conservatism’

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President and Nancy Reagan meet Pope John Paul II in Vatican City, June 7, 1982.

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Christopher DeMuth’s introductory remarks at “God, Honor, Country: President Ronald Reagan, Pope John Paul II, and the Freedom of Nations—A National Conservatism Conference,” February 4 in Rome:

Our conference title is long and complex. We could have chosen a shorter, punchier title, like: *Adiós Davos*. But we have a specific proposition to lay before the house, and before the public.

Today’s nationalist movements and leaders are being anathematized. We are called primitives, xenophobes, paranoids, racists—even populists. The name-calling comes from sophisticated people in the political, media, and university establishments. They have become openly contemptuous of democratic choice. Many have convinced themselves that today’s serious threat of authoritarianism comes not from the left but from the right.

We take a different view. We regard ourselves as direct descendants and rightful heirs of the Glorious Revolution of the 1980s—led by Ronald Reagan and St. John Paul the Great and also Margaret Thatcher. We think we are vindicating the victories of national independence in Central and Eastern Europe of 1989.

The president, pope, and prime minister were united by a powerful ideal: national freedom undergirded by biblical morality. They understood that these are the wellsprings of Western civilization—of individual freedoms of religion, conscience, inquiry, and speech; of collective freedoms of association and enterprise; of the rule of law; of human fulfillment.

And they, too, were outsiders. They were scorned, vilified, or just underestimated in their own times. Reagan and Thatcher were called extremists and warmongers. The pope's determination in the here and now was not fully understood until late in his life. In the aftermath of 1989, John O'Sullivan and I founded the New Atlantic Initiative to extend a welcoming hand to the beleaguered souls of Eastern Europe. We did so because the old Western Atlantic alliance was already turning a cold shoulder.

We are now in a different era with different problems. The heroes of the 1980s could only dimly foresee the turmoil of post-Communist politics in Eastern Europe in the 1990s, and the consolidation of bureaucratic, antidemocratic government in Western Europe in the 2000s. Financial collapse, mass migration, and the ideology of nations-without-borders lay in the future. Identity politics, woke capitalism, and deplatforming would have been completely incomprehensible to them. Their world was increasingly secular but still committed to liberal pluralism; ours is beset by hegemonic progressivism, which seeks to quarantine religious observance, traditional culture, bourgeois social norms, and the family itself. And which has set the stage for mainstream anti-Semitism.

But they did know that history takes wicked twists. Their legacy of national freedom and biblical morality is exactly what is under assault today. Our task is to defend and extend that legacy with the intelligence and courage they displayed.

National conservatism has become a living movement, with growing adherents and mounting electoral victories. We have an inspiring European vision: Of confident democracies devoted to the liberty and prosperity of their citizens. Of free nations competing and collaborating—admiring, criticizing, nudging, and learning from their neighbors. The occasional ethnographic joke will be permitted so long as it is in good taste. We national patriots can get along just fine.

But sovereignty is not an endpoint: It is an adventure, an expedition without trip insurance. Each nation has distinctive endowments and histories and constraints; some succeed better than others; even the best may lose their way. Statecraft is hard business and political mobilization is not an academic seminar. But transnational talkfests have their place. If our gathering today is as invigorating as we hope, it may even grow into a replacement Davos. May ours be less imperious, more humble, and more consequential.